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AFRICAN
FOOD SYSTEMS

POLICY BRIEF

Towards a more resilient agri-food system in Ghana post COVID-19

This policy brief draws from a study of agri-food system responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana.

We examined how the pre-COVID-19 stresses in the agri-food system have interacted with the fallouts of the pandemic to reshape relationships among the key state and non-state actors and interest groups, and the implications for the agri-food system as a whole.

Key messages

- Ghana's agri-food system was in crisis long before the arrival of Covid-19 and the establishment and implementation of a range of official responses to address the pandemic from 2020.
- Ghana's flagship agricultural programme, Planting for Food and Jobs (PfJ), focuses too heavily on production without paying adequate attention to equally important aspects of the food system such as processing, storage, transportation, marketing, nutrition and safety.
- Meanwhile, the agricultural component of the Ghana Coronavirus Alleviation and Revitalisation of Enterprises Support (CARES) programme places too much emphasis on helping large-scale production and processing.
- Ghana's agri-food system is gender-segmented and largely informal. Accordingly, agricultural policies to address Covid-19 effects on the agri-food system should seek to ensure that support is provided to both male and female actors working in the informal as well as formal sectors of the food system.



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Context

Ghana's food system was in crisis long before the arrival of Covid-19 in 2020. The country's largely smallholder-led, rain-fed farming system was already unable to produce enough to feed the population. In recognition of this reality, the government developed the Planting for Food and Jobs programme to support the growth and sustainability of the food system through more effective production.

Neglect of processing, storage and marketing

However, the policymakers paid less attention to equally important aspects of the food system, such as processing, storage and marketing. This is evident in the government's budgetary allocations. In 2017, almost 90% of the PfJ's budget was apportioned to providing farm inputs; 60.1% for fertiliser and 29.6% for seeds. Only 1.3% of the budget was allocated to marketing and e-agriculture activities.¹

COVID relief for farmers

Subsequently, in the wake of the pandemic, the state expanded the programme to cover more farmers. In addition, it introduced an agricultural component to the Ghana Covid-19 Alleviation and Revitalisation of Enterprises Support programme. The component supports commercial farming and agro/food processing of import-substitution commodities, specifically poultry, rice, sugar, tomatoes and cassava.

Production bias continues

Thus, in its response to Covid-19, the state once again placed the emphasis on providing support for *production* efforts, as well as for the large-scale actors in the food system.

Women inadvertently ignored

In focusing on production and large-scale agriculture in its PfJ and CARES programmes, the state has inadvertently ignored women as actors in the food system, since women are more likely to make a living by marketing food products than through employment in the production or processing of food in large quantities.

This neglect of women's major role in the informal food system and in addressing the myriad challenges they face inhibits their prospects of recovering from the socio-economic harm wrought by the pandemic.

Fig. 1: Study sites: Accra, Techiman and Wa



Footnote:

1: MoFA. 2017. [Planting for Food and Jobs: Strategic Plan for Implementation \(2017-2020\)](#). Accra: Ministry of Food and Agriculture, Republic of Ghana.

Findings

The University of Ghana together with the Network for Women's Rights in Ghana (NETRIGHT) conducted extensive research into the experiences of food system actors, including farmers, transporters and traders, in three regions of Ghana: Greater Accra, Bono East and Upper West.

Adverse effects

The research, which was funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) as part of a three-country study into the impacts of Covid-19 on the political economy of African food systems, revealed that the pandemic and the responses to it had produced significant adverse effects on Ghana's food system.

Reduced purchasing power and profits

Although Ghana has survived the pandemic without experiencing a national food shortage, traders, distributors and farmers have struggled to ensure a continuous supply of food to the country's markets. The Covid-19 outbreak and the containment measures imposed by the state in response to the pandemic reduced the purchasing power of the average Ghanaian, which cut into traders' profits, even eroding their capital base in some cases.

A ripple effect on farmers

This credit crunch in turn diminished traders' ability to pay the farmers from whom they purchase the items they sell. Thus, even as farmers were able to continue producing as a result of state interventions in agriculture, they did not necessarily reap the full benefits of this financially given the cash shortages within the food system as a whole. In this regard, support for production without a concomitant interest in support for distribution and marketing was shown to have undermined the effectiveness of the state's interventions in the agri-food system.

Acknowledging the importance of women in Ghana's food system

The importance of women in Ghana's food system may be illustrated by their central role in sourcing, trading and selling tomatoes, which are a crucial ingredient in Ghanaian cuisine – for example, in soups and sauces. Notwithstanding the importance of this crop, the country does not produce enough to meet its needs and imports nearly 100,000 tonnes of tomatoes from Burkina Faso each year.²

The supply is made possible by Ghanaian women who travel by truck for days and nights on end to purchase tomatoes from Burkinabe farmers. With only limited credit and braving potential attacks from armed robbers, these women receive no significant support from the government; and the challenges they face appear to have been ignored in the recent policy prescriptions and programmes developed in response to the Covid-19 impacts on Ghana's food system.

While the official goal of improving domestic production of tomatoes is a laudable medium/long term one, the more short-term issue of supporting the women traders who ensure the availability of tomatoes at Ghanaian markets also needs to be addressed.

Footnote:

2: van Asselt, J., I. Masias, and S. Kolavalli. 2018. [Competitiveness of the Ghanaian vegetable sector: Findings from a farmer survey](#). GSSP Working Paper 47. Accra: International Food Policy Research Institute.

Conclusion

It is important that the government adopt a holistic approach in its agricultural interventions, focusing as much on storage and marketing, as it does on production and processing. Production is but one element of the food system and a unilateral focus on it will not lead to the establishment of a resilient Ghanaian food system in the aftermath of Covid-19.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

1. Disbursements in Ghana's flagship agricultural programme, PfJ, as well as the agricultural component of Ghana CARES be distributed as evenly as possible across the food system.
2. The PfJ and the agricultural component of Ghana CARES should focus on addressing the needs of both the informal- and formal-sector stakeholders in the country's food system.
3. The state should put in place user-friendly measures to help women making a living in the informal sector of the food system. A credit scheme that requires minimal documentation for eligibility will be a good start.





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About this research

This policy brief is an output of a three-country study in Ghana, Tanzania and South Africa on 'The impacts of Covid-19 responses on the political economy of African food systems'. To learn more about this project, visit its page here: <https://www.plaas.org.za/african-food-systems-and-covid-19/>

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